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Praise for Oil Shale

Congressman Doug Lamborn | 10/29/08
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There is an energy resource in Colorado that is greater than all the oil in Saudi Arabia. Do you think politicians would want to strangle it before it ever materialized? The answer might surprise you.

The amount of oil in Colorado's oil shale lands is almost beyond comprehension, with estimates ranging from one-half to two trillion barrels. The Rand Corporation says that the mid-point of estimates for recoverable oil from shale, 800 billion barrels, is three times that of Saudi Arabia. This would satisfy the U.S. demand for imported oil of 10 million barrels a day for 200 years. Though some oil shale is found in Utah and Wyoming, the lion's share is in Colorado, and most of it is on public land.

I recently toured an industry research project on the Western slope, in Rio Blanco County, about 50 miles north of Rifle. Shell Oil Company is testing the commercial viability of its "in situ conversion process" in the Mahogany formation.

"In situ" literally means "in place." Rather than excavating the richest oil shale deposits from the ground to be processed and heated above ground, the heat is taken underground to the oil shale deposits. This keeps the air much cleaner and eliminates the problem of tailings. The deposits in Colorado are anywhere from 500 to 1,000 feet underground, and are about that thick.

Heaters are placed within the formation by being lowered into holes drilled for that purpose. Over time, the heat alters the actual oil-bearing substance, a precursor to crude oil called kerogen. It undergoes partial refining to become similar to the lighter, more desirable petroleum derivatives like kerosene and diesel and jet fuel. Finally, it gathers in pockets where it can be extracted by conventional oil pumping.

An innovation Shell is testing at the Mahogany site is the use of freeze walls. Freeze walls have been used many times in the past for construction and mining projects. A frozen barrier is formed around the area being heated to protect the surrounding groundwater from contamination.



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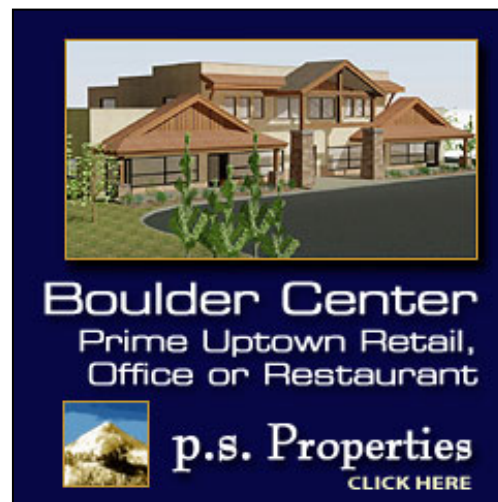


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With oil prices what they are, the company believes that this process will be economically viable on a commercial scale, given the demand for oil in the future. Several companies are researching other recovery processes, but Shell's is the furthest along today.

This vast energy potential rivals that of Saudi Arabia. It makes no sense to stifle exploration just as it is getting off the ground. These vast reserves have the added benefit of helping Coloradans increase tax revenues. Yet just last year, Congressman Mark Udall attempted to stifle the exploration and development of oil shale on the Western slope. Rep. Udall introduced an amendment to the Interior appropriations bill setting up a moratorium on oil shale activity for the first time ever. The amendment, which passed by a narrow margin, prevented federal regulators from finalizing rules for leases. Fortunately, it expired on October 1.

The stated reason Rep. Udall gave for the moratorium is that the environmental concerns had not all been addressed. This is nonsense. Regulators had not even written the final regulations yet. Those who are writing them are well aware of the need to comply with our nation's strict environmental rules. In any case, it was massive overkill.

This is the worst possible time to shut down the development of this huge energy resource. We have all experienced how high energy prices can damage our lives and the economy. We are also all aware of the national security need for energy independence. More than that, it is fundamentally unfair to change the rules at the last minute on companies when they have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in developing new technology.

Although the oil shale moratorium is gone for now, Coloradans need to think carefully about what can happen in January. I am extremely concerned that politicians in Washington may make the special interests of a vocal minority a higher priority than the need for an adequate energy supply and a strong economy.

Available energy from oil shale benefits all Americans, and especially all Coloradans.

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